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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SADRIST COR MEMBER CALLS FOR TRUST-BUILDING
MECHANISMS BETWEEN U.S. AND SADRISTS

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Robert Gilchrist for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[¶1.](#) (C) In a May 28 meeting with the DCM, Sadrism Council of Representatives (CoR) member Baha al-Araji (protect) said that Muqtada al-Sadr was not in full control of his organization, which was falling prey to "small groups with regional support." Describing the trust between the U.S. and the Sadrists as "below zero," al-Araji called for measures to build trust at the practical and political levels. He suggested the coalition work with him "behind the scenes" to improve security in Kadhamiya and that there be an agreement on a timetable for withdrawal, "even if it were to begin in four years." Al-Araji expressed his disillusionment with the CoR and the GOI, saying that Maliki needed to be freed from his constraints. The DCM emphasized to al-Araji that the coalition did not target Sadrists, but rather those who acted outside of the law. He said that the U.S. appreciated Muqtada's conciliatory words toward the Sunnis and that the U.S. would be watching Muqtada's rhetoric and actions closely in the coming weeks to see if he indicated any tacit acceptance of MNF-I's status in Iraq. While thanking al-Araji for the confidence-building measures he proposed, the DCM noted that the surest way for the Sadrists to help MNF-I reduce its footprint in Kadhamiya and elsewhere in Iraq would be to oppose all activities outside of the law. End summary.

Muqtada's Dilemma

[¶2.](#) (C) Al-Araji began by describing Muqtada as a "true patriot" whom others "have not dealt well with." The Sadrists, he said, were "exploited by small groups with regional support and regional agendas." While Muqtada did not accept these agendas, al-Araji claimed, he did not have enough control over Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) leaders to reign them in. Al-Araji gave the example of Qais al-Khazali, noting that "Muqtada never asked for him back." Muqtada planned to develop a list of several hundred "criminal elements" (presumably within JAM) over the next several weeks, al-Araji said.

Proposals for Building Confidence

[¶3.](#) (C) Describing the level of trust between the U.S. and the Sadrists as "below zero," al-Araji called for new mechanisms to build trust between the groups. "We need to calm down the Shi'a-majority areas so the U.S. can focus on fighting the terrorists." He proposed starting practical

cooperation in Kadhamiya, which he said was a "peaceful place" until people began to react badly to MNF tactics, which opened the door for JAM. He offered to broker a behind-the-scenes agreement with Kadhamiya leaders under which MNF would not enter the old area of Kadhamiya and in return the area's leaders would ensure that the area was not a safe-haven for criminals or weapons storage. The U.S. could help with service provision. If this model was successful, al-Araji concluded, it could be replicated in Shu'la and then Sadr City.

14. (C) On the political level, al-Araji noted that many people in the United States were discussing MNF withdrawal, as were the Sadrists. "Let's agree on a schedule for withdrawal," he proposed. "It does not even need to begin in one or two years. You can say 4 years." Al-Araji claimed that agreement on such a schedule for withdrawal would mean that there would not be the same level of opposition from Muqtada to coalition presence. "And if there are reasons you should stay and if you have built trust with the people, then we could revisit the agreement before you begin withdrawing."

(Note: Al-Araji, who chairs the legal committee at the CoR, is the CoR member most closely identified with the proposal circulating in the CoR to set a timetable for withdrawal of MNF. End note.)

Disillusioned with the Government

15. (C) Turning to government performance, al-Araji said he had no confidence in the CoR or the GOI. The elections had not brought the right people into government, he said. He complained about the staff around Maliki, saying "he needs to be freed from his constraints." Al-Araji said he regularly

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wrote Maliki letters of advice but that it was never taken. He criticized the ministers brought in through the government formation process. On the latest round of six new ministers proposed by Maliki, he again criticized Maliki's process for choosing them but said that the nominees for health and agriculture were "OK," the nominee for transportation "very bad," and the other three inconsequential because they were for ministries of state rather than full ministries. "You've put a lot of effort into forming a government, but we need to be building a state." He said he was disillusioned enough that he was thinking of "leaving Iraq in a few weeks or months if the situation does not improve."

U.S. and Sadrists: Coalition Cannot be the Scapegoat

16. (C) The DCM thanked al-Araji for meeting with him and noted that there were a number of areas where the Sadrists and the U.S. might agree. Both would agree on the importance of getting rid of Saddam, for example; both wanted to see a strong Iraq and neither were satisfied with the current level of services provided to the Iraqi people. The DCM noted that the coalition does not target political groups but does target those acting outside of the law. The DCM noted that a number of JAM members were involved in sectarian violence and other acts outside the law, and that JAM was associated with Muqtada, even if sometimes individuals acted against his stated orders.

17. (C) On the issue of coalition withdrawal, the DCM observed that if the coalition left quickly, before Iraqi security forces (ISF) were ready, a far larger conflict would likely erupt. He told al-Araji that it was important that the Sadrist trend, in its relationship with other segments of Iraqi society, continue in the direction of Muqtada's most recent sermon, in which he called for all elements to work together for Iraq. He emphasized that the coalition would be watching Muqtada's rhetoric over the coming period for an

indication of tacit approval of MNF-I as a security partner invited by the GOI. "We appreciate Muqtada's conciliatory words toward the Sunnis," he said, "but we do not want to see him make the coalition the scapegoat." The DCM said that, while he agreed with al-Araji on the importance of finding ways to build trust, MNF and the GOI could not relinquish the right to conduct security operations in a given area of Baghdad: "We have to treat all areas of the city equally. We've also found that the bad elements have a way of finding the areas we aren't concentrating on." On Kadhamiya, the DCM noted that if local leaders found a way of reducing violence and criminal behavior, there would be less of a need for MNF operations and the footprint would be reduced.

Legislative Priorities

18. (C) The DCM asked al-Araji briefly about major legislative initiatives. Al-Araji offered his view that the CoR should finish the provincial powers law before turning to the elections law. He said that people believed the hydrocarbon law was developed by the U.S. On deBaathification reform, he warned against the U.S. applying too much pressure, which might cause people to reject it. A better tactic, he said, would be the merger of the draft currently in the deBaathification committee with "your draft." The DCM stressed that the hydrocarbon and deBaathification laws were Iraqi laws.

Comment

19. (C) Al-Araji has the reputation of being a loose cannon and does not speak for the Sadrists. His statement that Muqtada is trying to reassert control over his organization comes as no surprise. The conversation reflected the slightly more pragmatic approach that at least some members of the Sadrist trend seem to be taking to coalition presence: al-Araji effectively conceded the need for coalition presence at present, though with the caveat that the coalition take a lighter approach in areas where it could develop reliable partners (such as al-Araji, naturally enough, in al-Araji's opinion). End comment.
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